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CAUTIONARY NOTES
ON THE NEW URBAN VISION

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A growing number of designers and planners are reconsidering the viability of the urban and suburban development models their professions have been advocating for more than half a century. They are fearful that the post-war landscape has precipitated a metropolitan crisis as severe as and more intractable than the urban conditions that launched reform professions like city planning a century ago.

The Urban Design: Reshaping Our Cities conference and the first Congress on the New Urbanism provided an opportunity to take the pulse of this thinking. Some participants remarked that a new consensus is emerging about the principles that should motivate urban design. That begs a number of questions: A consensus about what? A consensus of whom? And if a consensus exists, what happens next?

A Consensus about What?

The principles that form the core of this emerging consensus are simple: Development should be concentrated in compact arrangements in which a mix of households, businesses and institutions can locate close to each other and in which people can accomplish most everyday trips by walking or transit. New buildings should reinforce public and social spaces like streets and squares and should follow prevailing patterns of building type. These princi-

ples are notable for their democratic, humanist and urbanist orientation and because they consider the integration of planning and architecture at the building, neighborhood and regional scales.

Judging from the scores of projects presented at the Congress, there are other elements of commonalty that have not been articulated so overtly. For example, urban design practice and education continue to be associated primarily with large-scale interventions, such as urban redevelopment or planned new communities.

Yet other design problems and urban issues deserve the attention of this emerging urbanist, humanist consensus — including the design of infrastructure (such as water, waste disposal and recycling systems), subdivision rules, zoning text in established places where change is likely to occur in small increments, failed open spaces and declining older suburbs. New York's contextual zoning rules, for example, have quietly undone much of the city's 1961 tower-in-the-park zoning code. In Los Angeles, changing the rules that govern the site planning of supermarkets and mini-malls would have more impact on the urban fabric than projects like Playa Vista ever will.

Perhaps a greater diversity of clients would broaden the new urbanist perspective. The dialogue might include clients like communities that want to design neighborhood parks, public

housing residents who want to improve the places they inhabit, or agencies that do not always consider the impact of their programs on urban form, like school systems. Designers might find new clients in coalitions — universities and the towns that surround them, superstores and main street businesses, transit agencies and property owners near a station.

This consensus is silent on other issues. It says little about design as a process or a means to empowerment. What role should people with a stake an area have in shaping development that will affect that area? Can a participatory design process be a method of giving people investment in and control over their environments — and thus be a means to urbanism? Whatever the design principles, many of the projects discussed at these conferences were planned through "top down" processes similar to those that have historically alienated designers and planners from people in the communities in which they work.

A Consensus of Whom?

Most of the people who attended these two meetings were architects and planners who consult on public and private projects, scholars and students, and public officials from local planning, housing and development agencies. Notably, elected officials also showed

interest — Seattle Mayor Norman Rice and Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, offered keynote talks at Reshaping Our Cities; Milwaukee mayor John Nordquist participated in the Congress.

However, this group constitutes only the barest nucleus of people whose support will be necessary to advance a humanist, urbanist design agenda. More people from various components of the development industry must be involved. Investors (often banks) establish the criteria a project must meet to obtain financing; developers cultivate and respond to demand for housing, shops and offices; builders use practices and technologies that often favor one type of development over another. Together, these forces can have more impact on the design of places than local zoning, design regulations and the vision of urban designers.

The countless grassroots efforts to rebuild cities and communities are another untapped resource. In recent years, citizens and professionals who advocate causes like historic preservation, community development and environmental quality have forged creative alliances among themselves. Preservation and community development advocates joined forces in 1970s and '80s "back-to-the-city" movements. Parks and preservation advocates have collaborated on "cultural parks" in places like Lowell, Mass. Reshaping Our Cities suggested how designers could join with these groups in a broad-based movement; the Congress, even with its pointed political agenda, was relatively mute.

Beyond Consensus: What Happens Next?

If Reshaping Our Cities and the Congress were inspiring, they also were sobering. Inevitably the execution of visionary plans requires compromise and results in smaller-scale, more humble accomplishments. Both victories and defeats must be aired and analyzed, as they were at the Congress.

This new consensus must continue developing strategies for action. Andres Duany and Elizabeth-Plater Zyberk realized early on that they must embed their ideas in the codes of the communities they plan; Peter Calthorpe seeks to inject his transit-oriented development proposals into county and regional plans in Sacramento, San Diego and Portland.

But both have experienced setbacks. In Kentlands (in Gaithersburg, Md.), Duany and Plater-Zyberk designed a mall with one side connected to the fabric of a new community at a pedestrian scale. The developer scrapped the design when the retail market changed; current plans are for a standard strip shopping center anchored by a large-scale retail store. In Laguna West (south of Sacramento) Calthorpe proposed reduced parking ratios on the basis of transit and pedestrian accessibility, but retailers rejected the idea.

Any action plan will depend on the support of a thorough research program, neutral and rigorous, freed from the agendas of both retail consultants and visionary designers. The central question is whether compact, walkable communities can deliver on the designers' promises. How do various approaches to land-use mix, density and street and building design affect people's decisions about where they live, work, shop and relax — and how people move from place to place? Both

existing communities and completed new urbanist projects should be tested and assessed by a range of talents — geographers, environmental psychologists, planners, sociologists and others should examine these relationships.

The most important issue to consider — through planning, research and political agendas — is why such a fundamental mismatch exists between the types of places this new consensus advocates and places that are built. After World War II, design and planning theories converged neatly with popular visions for home and community life and with the evolution of financing and development into large-scale, national industries. The result was the atomized, standardized landscape against which the people at these meetings were reacting.

Today's new urbanist consensus finds little resonance either in the practices of the development industry or the vision of the public at large. The greatest challenge, therefore, is to build alliances and find opportunities to demonstrate how a vision really can make a difference.